

Personal Watercraft Issue Addressed by SAC

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The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Final Management Plan defines a personal watercraft as "shallow-draft, jet drive watercraft on which the operator sits, kneels, or stands and excludes those vehicles piloted from inside the craft." In February 2000, members of the Sanctuary Advisory Council asked the Superintendent to establish a Personal Watercraft Working Group charged with formulating a plan to manage PWC usage in the Sanctuary. The group met twice to discuss the issue before recommending that a process be established to develop a workable strategy for alleviating user conflicts and environmental damage that may be occurring as a result of PWC usage. The process, which is in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, involves a series of working group meetings, public education forums, formal public meetings, and potential regulation changes. So far there have been two working group meetings and two public education forums.



Personal Watercraft are the focus of the SAC working group.

The forums were held in Key Largo and Key West on July 11 and 12, respectively. The purpose of the forums was to expose concerned citizens of Monroe County to both local and national PWC issues. Guest speakers included Officer Steve Acton, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; George Garrett, Marine Resources Director for Monroe County; Sean Foertsch, Government Affairs Representative of the Personal Watercraft Industry Association; Sean Smith, President of the Bluewater Network; Rob Schutz, Public Affairs Representative for the Bombardier Corporation; Wayne Elliott, Chief Ranger of Biscayne National Park; Gary Yaworski, Owner of Island Watersports and Florida Keys Seadoo; and Amy Knowles, President of the Izaak Walton League Florida Keys Chapter. The forums were well attended by PWC owners, rental operators, and PWC industry representatives. The forums were not well attended by environmentalists, flats guides, and other stakeholders potentially opposed to PWC usage in the Florida Keys.

The next working group meeting, scheduled for late September, will lay the groundwork for determining the potential alternatives for dealing with the personal watercraft issue. In November, the Sanctuary will hold public hearings on the potential alternatives. Formal public comment on the alternatives will be taken at the November hearings. These comments will be considered to determine which alternatives to recommend to the Advisory Council.

These ranked alternatives will be presented to the Sanctuary Advisory Council after the working group has deliberated on them. Potential rulemaking and public notices will follow the Sanctuary Advisory Council's endorsement of the preferred alternative(s).

The Sanctuary has recently taken two additional steps to alleviate user conflicts and natural resource violations associated with the improper operation of PWC. A program to install idle speed/no wake spar buoys 100 yards offshore from residential shorelines of the Keys has been initiated. This program involves private financing by homeowners associations using private contractors to install the buoys. The Sanctuary has also developed a law enforcement partnership with the Monroe County Sheriff to help enforce Sanctuary and state regulations in nearshore waters of the Keys. This enforcement activity will take place on six new Yamaha Waverunners which were donated to the Monroe County Sheriff's Office by the Yamaha Corporation.

*Note: This article appeared in the Fall 2000 issue of the newsletter of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, **Sounding Line**. For more information, visit: www.fknmns.nos.noaa.gov.*